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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ADDIS ABABA 000953

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TAGS: [KIRF](#) [KISL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [ET](#)
SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS TENSIONS RISE IN GONDER

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

11. (C) The spate of religious conflict that erupted briefly in Gonder earlier this year is a manifestation of a long, tense history between Muslims and Christians in the region. From the mid-17th century until 1974, Muslims were not allowed to live or pray in the city. The Muslim community is attempting to build more mosques in the historically Orthodox city to accommodate its sizeable Muslim population. Although local officials claim that the January conflict was not religious in nature and has since been resolved, discussions with Gonder residents about religious dynamics suggest that such conflicts will only continue. End Summary.

12. (C) Muslims and Christians in the Gonder region have a long and tense history, starting back in the mid-17th century when Emperor Yohannes I banned Muslims from the city, forcing them to live in nearby Addis Alem. Muslims were not allowed to own land or move back into the city until the Derg took power in 1974. According to a local administrator in Gonder, Muslims and Christians have co-existed side by side for thousands of years without problems and they are a true example of religious tolerance. Recent conflict between Muslims and Christians reportedly started between 12- 18 months ago, when the municipality gave a Christian man a piece of land adjacent to a Muslim burial ground. The man intended to fodder cattle on the land, and the Muslims tried to pressure him into giving up the land so they could expand the burial ground. The Muslims tried to bury a corpse on his land, and the man reacted by shooting a Muslim man in the head. The Muslims then carried the dead bodies around town to demonstrate that they were being harassed. The local government intervened, and the situation was managed but tensions simmered. (NOTE: Our contact was unsure what specifically the government did to intervene, stating that "the government did something and the Muslims backed off." END NOTE.) According to one Gonder resident, there are also rumors that Muslims recently purchased a large number of machetes. These developments further inflamed latent inter-religious tensions.

13. (C) The most recent conflict began in late January 2009 when Muslims began to build a mosque in a place where traditionally two Talbots meet for Timkat (Epiphany), an important Orthodox holiday. The Muslims claimed that the land was given to them 17 years ago by the zonal administration. The Christian community gathered to protest and the situation became tense. Police were given strict instructions not to shoot unless ordered, so as not to instigate violence. Violence broke out and one policeman was shot and killed, eight other people were injured. In the

ensuing chaos, police arrested 40 people and continue to hold them while an investigation remains underway. Two days following the incident all Muslim store owners closed their shops in protest, debilitating commerce in the town. The local administration ordered the shops to open, threatening to revoke shop licenses and issue fines, and the shop owners complied and re-opened their shops. According to a local administrator (who seemed to PolOff very concerned about Gonder's reputation as a model for religious tolerance), the conflict has been resolved through discussions among religious leaders and elders. He was emphatic that the conflict was not religious in nature, but instead personal.

¶4. (C) One Christian source argued that the recent conflict is a result of Muslims being emboldened by their recent acquisition of power and wealth from their commercial activity. This change in social status has caused them to be more assertive and, in his view, provocative. For example, in the past year Muslims began construction of a mosque directly across from St. Gabriel church, one of the most important Christian churches in this previous bastion of Orthodox Christendom. Similarly, whereas up until 17 years ago there were only two mosques in Gonder, there are now 20.

Comment

¶5. (C) While religious tensions are certainly on the rise in Gonder, this is likely due to Gonder's history of religious segregation and therefore different in nature from other

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religious conflicts that we have seen flaring up elsewhere in Ethiopia. While in other areas of the country inter-religious tensions often stem from competition between religious communities over scarce resources or passions inflamed by fiery rhetoric during festivals -- which are increasingly broadcast over radio or TV -- Gonder's dynamic stems from the Christian's perception of an overly aggressive incursion by Muslims into the town. Gonder's history of excluding Muslims from the city fuels this perception, though the Muslim community in Gonder does not appear to be taking unreasonable actions or actions different than those occurring in communities of similar religious complexion elsewhere in Ethiopia. Post will continue to monitor inter-religious dynamics in Ethiopia. End Comment.
YAMAMOTO